

# THE FOUNDING OF ISO

“Things are going the right way!”

Willy Kuert

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Swiss delegate to the London Conference, 1946



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Willy Kuert

## Background

The conference of national standardizing organizations which established ISO took place in London from 14 to 26 October, 1946. The first interview in this book is with Willy Kuert, who is now the sole surviving delegate to the event.

ISO was born from the union of two organizations. One was the ISA (International Federation of the National Standardizing Associations), established in New York in 1926, and administered from Switzerland. The other was the UNSCC (United Nations Standards Coordinating Committee), established only in 1944, and administered in London.

Despite its transatlantic birthplace, the ISA's activities were mainly limited to continental Europe and it was therefore predominantly a "metric" organization. The standardizing bodies of the main "inch" countries, Great Britain and the United States, never participated in its work, though Britain joined just before the Second World War. The legacy of the ISA was assessed in a speech by one of the organization's founders, Mr. Heiberg from Norway, at an ISO General Assembly in 1976. On the negative side, he admitted that the ISA "never fulfilled our expectations" and "printed bulletins that never became more than a sheet of paper". On the other hand, he pointed out that the ISA had served as a prototype. Many of ISO's statutes and rules of procedure are adopted from the ISA, and of the 67 Technical Committees which ISO set up in 1947, the majority were previously ISA committees. The ISA was run by a Mr. Huber-Ruf, a Swiss engineer who administered the organization virtually single-handedly, handling the drafting, translation and reproduction of documents with the help of his family from his home in Basle. He attempted to keep the ISA going when the war broke out in 1939, but as international communication broke down, the ISA president mothballed the organization. The secretariat was closed, and stewardship of the ISA was entrusted to Switzerland.



The conference of the national standards bodies at which it was decided to establish ISO took place at the Institute of Civil Engineers in London from 14 to 26 October 1946. Twenty-five countries were represented by 65 delegates.

Though the war had brought the activities of one international standardization organization to an end, it brought a new one into being. The UNSCC was established by the United States, Great Britain and Canada in 1944 to bring the benefits of standardization to bear both on the war effort and the work of reconstruction. Britain's ex-colonies were individual members of the organization; continental countries such as France and Belgium joined as they were liberated. Membership was not open to Axis countries or neutral countries. The UNSCC was administered from the London offices of an international standardization organization which was already venerable – the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC). The IEC was founded in 1906. Its Secretary at the time of the Second World War was a British engineer called Charles Le Maistre.

Le Maistre has some claim to be known as the father of international standardization. He played a significant role in the history of many organizations. As well as being involved in the IEC since 1906, it was he who initiated the series of meetings which led to the founding of the ISA at the New York conference in 1926. Already in his 70s, he also took on the job of Secretary-General of the UNSCC, doubling this post up with his IEC duties. One of the IEC secretaries at the end of the war was Miss Jean Marshall (now the wife of Roger Maréchal, interviewed later in this book). She describes Le Maistre as: "...an extraordinary man.

He was the old school – very much the gentleman. Very diplomatic. He knew everybody. But you could see him quite often looking terribly worried and tired because he had a problem to solve. You could almost say he was married to standardization.”

The problem Le Maistre had to solve at the end of the war was how to create a new global international standardizing body. In October 1945, UNSCC delegates assembled in New York to discuss the future of international standardization. Delegates agreed that the UNSCC should approach the ISA with a view to achieving forming an organization which they provisionally called the “International Standards Coordinating Association” (hence the proposal, described in Willy Kuert’s interview, to include the word “coordinating” in ISO’s title). As the war came to a close, Le Maistre informed the Swiss caretakers of the ISA of the existence of the UNSCC. He asked whether the ISA would be willing to be incorporated into a new postwar standardization organization.

There was no easy answer to that question. According to its constitution, the ISA had lapsed out of existence. A General Assembly could only be called by the ISA President, or two members of ISA Council, and the term of these officers had long since ended. There was a flurry of correspondence between ISA members, and they decided that the 1939 ISA Council was still capable of acting. The Council was convened in Paris in July 1946, and Le Maistre opportunistically convened a separate UNSCC meeting in Paris on the same date. By the close of the first day’s discussions, the ISA Council had agreed on the need to join forces. On the second day, they met the UNSCC Executive Committee. It was resolved to convene a conference of all member countries belonging to the UNSCC and ISA three months later in London in October 1946.

On 14th October 1946, at the Institute of Civil Engineers in London, Charles Le Maistre called the conference to order. Twenty-five countries were represented by 65 delegates. Willy Kuert attended as the Secretary of the Swiss Standards Association (SNV). The ISA’s status at the conference was changed on the very first day. Mr. Huber-Ruf, the former Secretary-General of the ISA, wanted the ISA to continue with him at its head. He had met Charles Le Maistre a month before the conference, made much of the unconstitutional irregularities in the ISA’s position and requested to speak at the conference. When Le Maistre gave a report of this meeting to the ISA members at the conference, they reacted by deciding to liquidate the ISA at once. The conference between the UNSCC and the ISA was therefore abandoned on its first morning, but was immediately reconvened as a conference of the UNSCC and various other national standards associations.

Thereafter, the conference was plain sailing. In his interview, Willy Kuert describes how subcommittees were set up to break the back of complex areas, such as editing the final constitution and agreeing on the formula for calculating member subscriptions. He also describes how some of the practical issues were settled: the name of the organization ; the location of the Central Secretariat, the official languages to be adopted. Encouraged by this success, the UNSCC and ISA held separate meetings in the course of the conference in order to bring their own activities to an end. The UNSCC agreed to cease functioning as soon as ISO was operational; the ISA concluded that it had already ceased to exist in 1942. By the time the conference finished on 26th October, meetings of the provisional ISO General Assembly and the provisional ISO Council had already been held.

Willy Kuert retired as Director of the SNV in 1975, having never missed an ISO Council meeting in the course of Switzerland's five 3-year periods of Council representation.

### “Things are going the right way!”

We went to London, we Swiss, hoping to create a new organization which would do the work of standardization in a democratic way, and not cost too much money. At the end of the London conference, we had the feeling that the new statutes and new rules would permit us to do such work. Real, effective work. “Things are going the right way!” That was the feeling.

I must say, it was a year after the end of the war, and London was still partly destroyed. It made quite an impression on me. All the hotels were good, but very short of supplies. Eating was a matter of – how can I put it? – limiting one's appetite. It was naturally very difficult for the country to act as a host for foreigners, but they did it, and they did it well.

The atmosphere at first was a bit uncertain! We were sizing each other up. We feared that the UNSCC didn't want an organization like the ISA had been, but an organization which was dominated by the winners of the war. We wanted to have an organization open to every country which would like to collaborate, with equal duties and equal rights. The inch system and the metric system were also constantly at the back of our minds. There was an inch bloc and a metric bloc. We didn't talk about it. We would have to live with it. But we hoped that ISO might provide a place where we could get consensus in this area.

Later, however, the atmosphere became very good. It was friendly and it was conciliatory. I was astonished that the Soviet Union delegates were such good



At the London conference in 1946, Geneva was elected by a majority of one vote as headquarters for ISO.

working delegates. They proposed some very good ideas and were prepared to accept democratic rules. We had heard: "With Russians, you can't talk about anything!", but they were reasonable and friendly. At the end of the meetings in the evening, though, they were picked up by people from the Embassy without any contact with others.

The first question that had to be settled in London was that of the name of the new organization. There were different proposals. The English and the Americans wanted "International Standards Coordinating Association", but we fought against the word "coordinating". It was too limited. In the end ISO was chosen. I think it is good; it is short. I recently read that the name ISO was chosen because "iso" is a Greek term meaning "equal". There was no mention of that in London!

The work in London was split up, and a subcommittee was set up to deal with each question. There was a finance committee and a committee to edit the constitution; everything was prepared by small groups of delegates. The subcommittees met in the evening after the normal, official meetings, and prepared the papers for the next day. It worked very well and consequently, at the conference itself, there were no great debates.

But there were a few points of discussion, and the first point was the constitution. What voice should members have in the organization? Should they be guided only by a body like a Council, or should we have an organization which permitted everybody to speak freely? After a long discussion, it was decided to have both a General Assembly and a Council. There was to be a President and a Vice-President and a Treasurer. (The Treasurer was going to be called an Honorary Treasurer to begin with, but nobody quite understood what "Honorary" meant!)

Then there was a lengthy discussion about languages. Naturally enough, English and French were proposed first. Then the Soviet delegates wanted to have Russian treated in exactly the same way as English and French. Today it is another story but, at that time, nobody knew Russian! However, the Russian delegate said: "There are so-and-so many people who speak Russian, including people in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and many others..." After a long discussion, we decided to ask a small group to work on this. The group came back and said that the Soviet Union was prepared to translate all the documents and to send translations to every member of the new organization. However, the Soviet Union wished to have no distinction between Russian and English and French. We could accept this proposal and it was set down.

Then there was a very interesting discussion about finance. A committee had been set up to prepare a formula for deciding membership fees. One of the



delegates proposed to let each member body decide how much it would pay! Others wanted to combine the membership fee with that of the IEC. But eventually a formula was found, which depended on the population of each country and its commercial and economic strength. Everybody could accept it, and it was agreed on the spot exactly how much all the countries present would have to pay.

Finally, there was the question of the seat of the new organization. First of all, the Soviet delegation was in favour of Paris. Paris is a central town in Europe. Then Geneva was proposed, and Montreal in Canada, and a few others. We had a series of ballots, and at the end Geneva was elected by a majority of one vote. So the Central Secretariat came to Geneva.

I can't say that ISO today is the same as the one we founded in London. The world has changed, the statutes and by-laws have been revised, and special committees have been formed by ISO, like the committee for the developing countries. But the idea, the main duties and the purpose – those are the same, I think.